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ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN IN GEORGIA – FACING A DOUBLE BURDEN?

This paper examines the situation of women belonging to ethnic minorities, one of the most vulnerable social groups in the Republic of Georgia. Minority women carry the double burden of belonging to frequently discriminated ethnic groups, as well as to the historically suppressed gender. It focuses on gender-based discrimination and violence – and the social structures and norms that cause them – as well as impediments to women’s economic empowerment and political participation. First it looks at the situation of women among the Azeri and Armenians, Georgia’s two largest minority groups. Domestic violence is endemic to their communities, especially in rural areas. Women take care of household and family, as dictated by social norms, but also face increasing economic pressures, especially in areas where labor migration is common. Azeri women are particularly exposed to such problems. They also suffer from the effects of early marriage and childbirth. The paper also considers women in some of the smaller minorities (Ossetian, Kist, Yezidi Kurdish, Roma), whose situation is not as well documented as that of Azeri and Armenian women. Throughout the paper it emerges that women across different ethnic minorities face similar difficulties, and that the political and social isolation of minorities contributes to the low status of women within them.¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I explore the situation of ethnic minority women in Georgia, focusing on gender-based violence, economic empowerment and political participation. Importantly these are not distinct topics, but interrelated phenomena: domestic decision-making structures and violence are the main obstacles to increased female participation in the political and economic spheres. Conversely, women’s second-rate role here has diminished their ability

to become financially independent and publicly recognized, which could strengthen their domestic position.² Over the past years the Georgian government has introduced several legal measures directed at alleviating some of the problems Georgian women encounter and strengthening their position in society, including the *National Action Plan on Gender Equality* (2011-2013), the *National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security* (2012-2015), as well as action plans on domestic violence (2011-2012), and trafficking in human beings (2011-

2012). However, according to the UN Gender Thematic Group, consisting of domestic and international organizations with a gender focus, implementation of the national action plans has been uneven, with the *National Action Plan on Gender Equality* significantly lagging behind.

Regarding issues of gender-based violence, as well as economic and political participation, the national action plans on domestic violence and gender equality are currently the most important legal documents. Following the 2010 *Law on Gender Equality*, the *National Action Plan* (NAP) aims to (a) enhance gender equality in public institutions, (b) introduce gender topics to the education system and increase public awareness of them, (c) encourage equal participation of men and women in the national economy, (d) support women's equal political participation, and (e) mainstream gender in the social sphere, as well as in the health care system.³ Experts, however, complain that the broad and all-encompassing character of the action plan is actually one of the main factors hindering its implementation. The domestic violence-NAP, on the other hand, focuses on the implementation of the 2006 *Law on Domestic Violence*, public awareness campaigns and the protection of and assistance to victims of domestic violence.⁴ Two state-funded crisis shelters for women were opened in Tbilisi and Gori over the last years; the majority of facilities, however, are operated by non-governmental organizations such as 'Sakhli' and the 'Anti-violence Network of Georgia.'⁵

In both action plans, ethnic minority women are granted special attention, along with rural women and IDPs. The NAP on gender equality, for instance, highlights the particular need to conduct seminars and trainings for "the rural population, IDPs and ethnic minority women," as well as to support business-oriented education of women belonging to these

particularly vulnerable groups.⁶ Furthermore, the NAP suggests special programs to identify representatives of national minorities and increase their skills and capacities. The NAP on domestic violence, on the other hand, includes informational-educational meetings "with the following target group: (a) internally displaced persons: (b) rural population, (c) ethnic minorities."⁷

However, according to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Georgian government, which ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) in 1994, lacks the necessary data to develop policies tailored to the particular needs of certain segments of the Georgian population. In its *Concluding Comments*, the Committee expressed concerns "about the lack of information on the situation of rural women and ethnic minority women in the areas covered by the Convention" and demanded that the government "enhance its collection of data [...], disaggregated by sex as well as by ethnicity, age and by urban and rural areas."⁸ So far, the Georgian government has remained ambivalent about these matters, emphasizing the right to self-identification codified in Article 3 of the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities."⁹

Despite valid skepticism about the value of an ethnic perspective on gender questions in a country where the situation of women is significantly determined by other factors, such as geographical location or age group, the lack of information on minority women is still striking. This paper strives to partially fill this gap by contributing to a better understanding of the situation of ethnic minorities regarding gender-based violence, as well as the economic and political participation. Such an undertaking must from the beginning acknowledge that, at



times, improvements in women's situation and the advancement of minority rights might not always be easily reconciled. As it will emerge in the following chapters, the comparatively strong discrimination of women within ethnic minorities can only be fully explained in reference to the minorities' traditional gender norms, which prevent women from equal opportunities, rather than problems inflicted by the majority on these groups.

Research for this working paper was conducted between November 2012 and March 2013, and draws on secondary sources, as well as fieldwork in the minority regions of Kvemo Kartli (Azeri) and Samtskhe-Javakheti (Armenian). To expand the picture, qualitative meetings were conducted with representatives of minority organizations (including members of the Gender Working Group of the Council of National Minorities), women NGO leaders, members of local self-governance, students, student representatives, rural women, teachers, and academic experts.

II. AZERI WOMEN IN GEORGIA

The following three sections present the situation of Azeri women in regards to gender-based violence, economic empowerment and political participation. Azeri women in Georgia are often regarded as the most vulnerable members of society due to the double burden of belonging both to the historically discriminated gender, and to an ethnic and religious minority. While religion factors into the different roles attributed to men and women throughout the Caucasus, the strict division of gender roles typical for Muslim societies places Azeri women in a particularly difficult position.

Yet, in the case of the Azeri community in Georgia, the traditional Muslim practice of confining women to motherhood and family was somewhat mitigated by the experience of a

Soviet ideology of gender equality that encouraged women's political and economic participation. In addition to the supposed liberation of women in the Soviet Union, Azeri women in Georgia have witnessed the transformation of a former communist country into an increasingly functioning democracy over the past few years. While political participation remains low among ethnic Azeris, there is little doubt that the majority of them nowadays regards Georgia as their homeland and wants their children to become more involved in the development of Georgian society.¹⁰ Increased awareness of the social and economic opportunities Georgia can offer has contributed to the willingness to integrate. Along with recent efforts to expand language training for youth and young adults from ethnic minorities, this gives reason to be at least cautiously optimistic about the future of Azeri women in Georgia.

2.1 Gender-based violence

Domestic violence: Facts and figures

While domestic violence occurs across ethnic groups, it is widely assumed that Azeri women are particularly prone to experience gender-based violence. The *Reproductive Health Survey Georgia 2010*, conducted by the Georgian Center for Disease Control and Public Health in collaboration with the Georgian Ministry of Labor, Health, and Social Affairs, indicates that Azeri women are almost twice as likely as ethnic Georgians to experience verbal and/or physical abuse in their marriages:¹¹



Characteristic	Lifetime – Verbal Abuse	Lifetime – Physical Abuse	Lifetime – Sexual Abuse	Last 12 Months – Verbal Abuse	Last 12 Months – Physical Abuse	Last 12 Months – Sexual Abuse
National Average	14.8	4.5	1.7	8.4	1.4	0.5
Georgian	13.4	3.9	1.7	7.7	1.2	0.5
Azeri	29.6	8.9	2.3	18.1	2.5	0.4
Armenian	13.2	6.0	1.9	5.7	1.1	0.0
Others	26.8	10.3	2.3	15.2	4.7	0.0

Verbal and physical abuse by an intimate partner is particularly wide-spread in the Azeri community: here almost one-third of women reported verbal abuse during their lifetime and 9% indicated that their husband or partner had inflicted physical harm on them. The data also suggests that the situation has not improved in recent years: the rates for verbal and physical abuse of Azeri women ‘during the last 12 month’ are also roughly double those for ethnic Georgian women. Considering that overall rates of domestic violence have remained relatively stable (at least since comprehensive data was first collected in 1999) this points to deeply entrenched problems in gender-relations inside Azeri families.¹²

Another report, the *National Research on Domestic Violence against Women in Georgia* (2010), suggests that the main divide in the incidence of domestic violence lies between urban centers and rural areas (rather than ethnicity). Conflicting data exists on this phenomenon – the *Reproductive Health Survey* reports near-identical rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) for urban and rural women

respectively¹³ – but might attest to a problem mentioned by the authors of the *National Research*, namely that urban residents are more aware of the very concept of gender-based violence and hence better able to share their experience of violence with strangers.¹⁴

The latter is confirmed by government statistics, which show that domestic violence is grossly under-reported to the police. According to the official report *Domestic Violence, Domestic Conflicts and Juveniles 2007-2011* published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs the largest ratio of reported violent incidences occurred in Tbilisi (5.4 per 10,000 citizens), followed by Mtshkheta-Mtianeti (3.4). Kvemo Kartli, with 1.6 cases of violence reported per 10,000 citizens, does not stand out.¹⁵ But these numbers should be read with a grain of salt as they only indicate instances of domestic violence that were registered by the police.¹⁶ Even a brief comparison with the *Reproductive Health Survey* brings out the higher proportion of domestic violence crimes that are unreported. If the numbers estimated by the survey are even remotely accurate¹⁷ the national averages in each

category applied to the roughly 1,000,000 Georgian women between 15 and 44 (which is the age group covered by the survey) would suggest that 14,000 instances of physical violence, 5,000 instances of sexual violence and 84,000 instances of verbal violence are perpetrated against these women annually. The police, on the other hand, only reported 1,025 instances over the course of five years. Based on the high reliability of the Reproductive Health Survey, it can be concluded that there is, indeed, a higher prevalence of domestic violence among ethnic Azeris despite the low number of officially registered instances of domestic violence in Kvemo Kartli.

Traditional gender norms and family structure

One of the most frequent explanations for the problem of domestic violence in Georgia is the economic hardship caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although the actual number is hard to estimate given their frequent involvement in the informal market, several local experts affirmed that in many cases women have become their families' main breadwinners due to high male unemployment caused by the unviability of traditionally male-dominated sectors, such as the industrial sector, during the 1990s.

It is reported that women turned out to be more flexible to adjust to the new economic circumstances by taking up economic activities that did not fit their actual qualification. It is therefore not surprising that one of the main reasons for domestic violence identified by the respondents of the *National Research on Violence against Women in Georgia* was "male unemployment depriving the man of his traditional position in the family (frequently coupled with drinking, sometimes with drug addiction)".¹⁸ Yet, the reaction to changing gender roles is only a symptom of the deeply

engrained gender stereotypes discriminating women, often referred to as the "Caucasian mentality".

In the case of the Azeri population of Georgia many of our interviewees shared the view that this Caucasian mentality is amplified by Muslim traditions and beliefs, a perception that is corroborated by the *Study of social and economic conditions and attitudes of Kvemo Kartli population* (2011), conducted by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation together with the Institute of Social Studies and Analysis. They found that the percentage of those accepting violence against women is highest among ethnic Azeris: 16.5% of the Azeri respondents fully agreed with the statement that "if the husband uses physical violence against the wife (physical punishment), it means the wife has deserved it," compared to 10% of Armenians and 8.3% of ethnic Georgians. While there is little direct assent to violence, Azeri women display a number of troubling, and sometimes contradictory, attitudes towards gender relations, reaffirming the trend of on-going domestic violence discussed above. The fact that 63.4% of Azeris respondents agree that "a good wife and mother will never deserve bad treatment by the husband" suggests that wives and mothers who fall short of social expectations (who are not 'good') could be considered legitimate targets of violence by their husbands.¹⁹ Furthermore, according to the *Reproductive Health Survey*, 84.9% of Azeri women agreed with the statement that "a good wife obeys her husband" (compared to the national average of 42.5%) and only 52.6% regard it as legitimate for a woman to refuse intercourse if her husband has a sexually transmitted infection (the national average is 76.5%).²⁰

Domestic violence is only one manifestation of an unbalanced power structure

within the family, according to which the woman's position is subordinated to that of her husband. Yet, a closer look at the traditional structure of Azeri families reveals the latter notion to be shortsighted. As Leila Suleimanova, chairwoman of the Union of Azerbaijani Women of Georgia remarks, often it is the mother-in-law who plays a crucial role in the appearance of domestic violence, not only among ethnic Azeris.²¹ Frequently, the husband or son is only the formal head of the family while his mother wields the actual power not only over the family's financial resources but also about her daughter-in-law's personal freedom and individual choices.²² Importantly, this phenomenon is not limited to Azeri families, as highlighted by the *National Research on Violence against Women in Georgia*, according to which "the victims of violence, as well as policemen, experts, and service providers (...) state that domestic violence is mainly perpetrated by a husband and his family (mostly mother-in-law)".²³ The complexity of gender relations could be well observed during a visit to a traditional Azeri family in the village Kvemo Bolnisi in February 2013. While the (male) head of the family expressed liberal views regarding women's rights, none of the women around the table contributed to the conversation except for the grandmother who turned out to be the actual head of the family.

Consequently, an accurate description of the problem of gender-based violence has to take into account that both men and women can be victims, as well as perpetrators. A woman might be a victim of domestic violence when she is young, but can become a perpetrator herself at an older age. Similarly, a husband who represses his wife might be simultaneously repressed by his own mother. While the extended family is traditionally seen as the fundamental unit of social interaction and support within Azeri

culture, the notion of the family as a "sacred place" is thus contradicted by the fact that the family is the sphere where most forms of violence occur. The lack of private space creates a close, but tense atmosphere that facilitates violent and non-violent abuse. According to Nargis Alieva, deputy chairwoman of the Union of the Azerbaijani Youth in Georgia, and herself a young mother, the lack of private space is one of the biggest problems for young couples who can hardly afford to live separately given the limited employment opportunities in Kvemo Kartli.²⁴

Early marriages

Gender experts and women NGO leaders identify the prevalence of early marriages as the biggest obstacle for Azeri women to participate in the country's social, political and economic life, as well as one of the main reasons for the high incidence of domestic violence. In Azeri culture, marriage (and divorce), traditionally governed by *sharia* law (despite regional variations), is seen as a social and political occasion between families rather than an intimate relationship between individuals. Marriage was, and continues to be, considered a contract, through which "a man gained full authority over his wife and children."²⁵ In practice, however, authority over newly-wed women was exercised by their mother-in-law or other older women of the husband's family. Most marriages were and still are patrilocal, barring instances where the bride's family has no sons.²⁶

Men and women under the age of 18 are permitted to marry under Georgian law if they are at least 16 years old and obtain parental consent. Individuals who are 18 or older do not require parental consent. According to official GEOSTAT figures for 2011, most marriages occurred between individuals from the age

group 22 to 29 (roughly evenly distributed between those ages), with a tendency for men to marry somewhat later in their lives. In 2011, 659 women and 39 men under the age of 18 were registered for marriage. In Kvemo Kartli a total of 130 underage girls (58 sixteen-year olds and 72 seventeen-year olds) were married, but only two men (both aged 17).²⁷ Kvemo Kartli, furthermore, displays a significant disparity between the ages at which men and women are first married. While the situation for men does not deviate from the nation-wide picture, women here are significantly more likely to marry at a relatively young age. One fifth (25%) of female under-age marriages occur here (though only one-tenth of the total Georgian population resides in Kvemo Kartli), and numbers for females peak at the ages of 18 and 19 (compared to 20-21 nationally). Importantly, this does not apply to Azeris living in urban areas such as Rustavi, where figures match with national trends. The gender disparity in marriage age confirms other statistics indicating that Azeri women, concentrated in Kvemo Kartli, tend to marry men significantly older than themselves.

According to Leila Suleimanova, chairwoman of the Union of Azerbaijani Women of Georgia, the numbers of early marriages has been decreasing since the 1990s, with the exception of the villages of Algeti, Azizkendi, Sabirkendi, Kizil-Adjlo in Marneuli municipality, as well as Nakhiduri and Kvemo Bolnisi in Bolnisi municipality, where it is still common for girls to marry at the age of fourteen or fifteen. According to Suleimanova, marriage is an institution that attracts young girls because of the attention that is involved in the Azeri marriage tradition, allowing young girls to feel like “princesses”.²⁸ Formalities and rites between *elchilik* (asking for the bride’s hand) to the completion of the marriage ceremony often take weeks, or even months, including initial

contact between the senior female members of each family, protracted gift-giving, the three-day long wedding celebrations, and the bride’s public bath on the seventh day after consummation of the marriage.

With virginity being an essential criterion for potential brides, curiosity about sex, “triggered by TV and internet,” is cited as another reason for the appeal of early marriages.²⁹ This highlights the problematic consequences of the dictate of premarital virginity that causes young girls to take irresponsible choices, posing a severe danger to their physical health. Underage marriages often lead to early physical aging related to early childbearing and a high abortion rate. This is substantiated by the *Reproductive Health Survey*, according to which Azeri women have the highest fertility rate in the country (2.4 compared to 2.0 for ethnic Georgians).

Age-specific fertility rates by ethnicity/region:³⁰

Characteristic	15-19 (live births per 1000)	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	Total Fertility Rate (births per woman)
Georgian	30	141	117	65	30	9	2.0
Azeri	143	184	96	18	29	0	2.4
Armenian	59	118	101	70	22	0	1.9
Other Ethnicity	66	144	111	60	40	73	2.5

The rates among Azeri women only surpass the average in the two lower age groups, between the ages of 15-19 and 20-24 respectively, showing that Azeri women not only have more children in general, but have them at an earlier age.³¹ Despite the fact that abortions have decreased in Georgia, Azeris still have the highest abortion rates for all age groups (3.3 compared to 1.6 nationally).³²

By depriving young women of the possibility to make an informed choice about their life partner, early marriages not only have violent consequences, but are violent acts in themselves, classified as human rights violations in international law.³³ To compare – the 2010 UNICEF study on the prevalence of early marriages in Azerbaijan, mentions a wife's obedience as one of the reasons for early marriages: the patriarchal family model in Azerbaijan „demands from wives a strict obedience and subordination to their husbands. Thus, the independent sense of self that a girl may develop during adolescence is seen as undesirable. The younger the bride, the greater the chances are of conditioning her into the appropriate subservient behavior.“³⁴ However,

none of our interviewees supported early marriages. They voiced strong objections, citing the value of education for women and the importance of mutual respect for a successful marriage.

Young Azeri representatives emphasize that early marriages should not be regarded as a problem limited to the Azeri community. Reducing it to a religious problem is, indeed, shortsighted; as some of our interviewees pointed out “mental maturity and sound judgment” are the decisive criteria for marriage eligibility according to the Quran.³⁵ However, a clear-cut distinction between religion and cultural traditions was made impossible by the so-called ‘privatization’ of religion in the Soviet Union era that lead to the elimination of the intellectual and ideological dimensions of Islam. According to Nayerreh Tohidi, a professor of Gender and Women's Studies at California State University and expert on the sociology of gender and religion in Muslim societies, Azeris had to turn their religious beliefs into private traditions and practices in order not to display their Muslim identity.³⁶ As a consequence, many Azeris have only limited knowledge of their own religion and are susceptible to mistake early

marriage for a strict religious principle. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that early marriages have an economic dimension too. It was not only the attempted emancipation of women that decreased underage marriages during Soviet times, but also the basic social and economic securities provided by the state that partly relieved the family from its traditional function as the sole safety net. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, marriage – traditionally regarded as a form of social advancement – regained its crucial function as a means to overcome economic uncertainty and poverty through the support of the extended family.

Bride abduction

Deficient state structures incapable of enforcing a reduction of early marriages after the Soviet collapse, a general lack of awareness campaigns and an increased adherence to Muslim traditions caused the revival of bride abductions in the 90ies, which has also had an important impact on the prevalence of early marriages. In recent years, however, there has been a significant decrease in bride abductions in Georgia due its criminalization as a “deprivation of liberty” under §143 of the Criminal code of Georgia introduced in 2004.³⁷ Yet, in 2006, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) required the Georgian government to “include in its next report information on marriages in Georgia involving girls under 18 and on the prevalence of the abduction of women for purposes of marriage, particularly among ethnic minority women.”³⁸ However, in its combined fourth and fifth periodic report from 2012, the Georgian government responded that the “abduction of women for the purpose of marriage occurs very rarely [and that] such abductions are often arranged elopements.”³⁹ The *National Research on Violence against Women in Georgia* from

2010, on the other hand, reported that Azeri women from Marneuli identified the abduction of young women as “a type of violence that, in their words, is widespread among representatives of their ethno-religious group”.⁴⁰ According to the Azeri respondents “abducted girls are only 12-13 years old and cannot take proper care not only of their husbands and their families, but also of themselves; usually husbands forbid them to go to school and to continue their studies, and sometimes – even visit their friends and parents.”⁴¹ However, none of our interviewees confirmed the view that bride kidnapping is still a widespread phenomenon. Most of them could recall only one or two cases of which they were not even sure if they were voluntary or not. For example, Leila Mamedova from the Union of Azerbaijani Youth in Georgia remembered only one case of serious kidnapping over the last years, while all others turned out to be voluntary.⁴² And according to Samira Ismayilova, chairwoman of the Azerbaijani Students’ Association of Georgia, “bride kidnapping is no longer a problem.”⁴³

Despite the fact that the phenomenon of bride kidnapping has been widely eradicated during the last few years, a widespread fear of bride abduction persists among members of the Azeri community, providing a potential excuse for parents to restrict their daughters’ liberties. Bride kidnapping therefore continues to be a ‘real’ problem inasmuch as it is still perceived (or claimed to be perceived) as a threat that influences parental behavior. What underlies the fear of abduction, however, is not solely a worry about girls’ personal freedom, but about their virginity and by that the honor of the family.⁴⁴

The prevalence of a perceived threat of bride abduction became particularly apparent during a field trip to an Azeri village in Kvemo Kartli. As one of our interviewees, a traditional

middle-aged Azeri man, pointed out, the choice regarding his own daughters was not between marrying or not, but between getting abducted and not having any choice at all on the one hand and getting married at an age at which one would not want to marry under ideal circumstances.⁴⁵ In this vein, early marriages are sometimes considered the ‘lesser evil.’ Yet, what first appears like a genuine concern for the well-being and self-determination rights of young girls, is often essentially a worry for the girls’ ‘honor,’ closely linked with the reputation of the whole family. Once a girl is abducted, her virginity, and thereby her whole integrity, is put at stake. As a consequence, some girls choose to stay in marriage with their kidnapper and his family in order to save her personal status as well as the status of her own family. Yet, it would be false to downplay bride abduction as part of mainstream Azeri tradition. While bride kidnapping is frequently perceived as a traditional form of marriage, ethnographers point out that it is, in fact, an “anti-tradition”: As the German social anthropologist Elke Kamm explains, bride kidnapping was historically seen as a way to escape from the high costs of traditional wedding ceremonies, as “a violation of existing traditional marriage rules” and therefore “had little respect from the head of the family”.⁴⁶

Despite the general negative attitude towards the individual self-determination rights of women, qualitative research revealed that there is a certain respect for women taking an individual choice by escaping an arranged marriage. However, it turned out that this was only the case where women subsequently led successful lives. Fleeing an arranged marriage becomes a brave act only if it leads either to a successful voluntary marriage or to a successful career.⁴⁷

2.2 *Economic empowerment*

Employment

Rural Azeri communities in Kvemo Kartli largely participate in the so-called informal economy, understood as “a system of trade or economic exchange outside state controlled or money based transactions.”⁴⁸ Members of those communities rely on traditional, non cash-based, economic activities, such as household production, bartering, subsistence farming, and labor exchanges for their financial livelihood. Recent research into three representative villages in the area showed that 90% of farmers and two-thirds of service providers regularly engaged in such non-cash activities.⁴⁹ These activities are not, or only partially, included in official statistics, complicating government and NGO-efforts to tackle poverty in the region. Azeri women play a particularly important role in informal economic activities. A 2012 study by Mercy Corps and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation found that cheese production was the most significant good for bartering.⁵⁰ Because women traditionally make the cheese, they outnumber men as participants in non-cash exchanges. They are also responsible for choosing and exchanging or purchasing food and household goods for the family. Involved women indicated that they enjoyed the timesaving effect through the direct exchange of goods. While this is true for women in the Kvemo Kartli region in general, it applies particularly to Azeri women, “who often face restrictions on their movement outside the home.”⁵¹

Although they are not equal participants in Georgia’s economy, women are widely perceived as having been better able to deal with the economic difficulties and high unemployment rates of the post-Soviet period. Since the early 1990s women dominate in the

fields of small-scale trade and consumer services, engaging in economic activities such as street vending and subsistence agriculture, demonstrating a higher flexibility to engage in low status jobs. Despite the shift in gender roles regarding the traditionally male role of the main breadwinner, which has been taken over by women in many cases, there has not been a corresponding shift in the distribution of household duties and childcare responsibilities.⁵² Consequently, many Azeri women often cover three main areas of work: domestic work (cooking, cleaning, etc.), agricultural work (growing the field, harvesting), and the selling of their products. Local experts describe the role of men in this process as limited to stereotypical work such as ‘carrying boxes’ or ‘driving the car.’⁵³ However, since the status of head of the family is now detached from the role of main breadwinner and men regard themselves as superior regardless of their actual contribution, most of the tasks performed by women are not even regarded as work, unlike traditional female occupations such as teaching or social work.⁵⁴

Traditional gender stereotypes also strongly impact on women’s access to financial credits due to their frequent lack of property ownership. According to USAID’s gender assessment, “it is customary for men to be given preference in property inheritance, ownership and administration”.⁵⁵ This discriminating practice prevents women from equal participation in business: “Although there are no legal barriers to women’s right to own property, in practice women are generally not owner of real property and therefore they face an additional burden in finding the collateral needed to obtain credit and business loans.”⁵⁶ While this is a general problem concerning the whole country, ethnic Georgians again hold more progressive opinions on the issue. According to the 2011 study on Kvemo Kartli,

the majority of respondents (59.1%) support the statement that men and women should have equal rights to property. Still, it has to be noted that even though the majority of Azeris share this view, they are still less supportive than ethnic Georgians, suggesting that the illiberal inheritance tradition is more widespread in their communities.⁵⁷

A closely related issue is the poor knowledge of the state language, which does not only reduce the employment opportunities of Azeri women (and Azeris in general), but also limits implementation of rights granted to women under Georgian law, such as equal property rights. The numbers provided by various non-governmental reports estimate that between 30% and 78.3% of Azeris do not speak Georgian.⁵⁸ Yet, the majority of Azeris have a positive attitude towards the Georgian language, showing great awareness of the fact that a professional command of the state language is the precondition for social and economic advancement. During several field trips to Kvemo Kartli it also emerged that most adults want at least their children to be fluent in Georgian, which is supported by figures from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation: 67.3% of the Azeri respondents support preschool education in Georgian, 83.8% school education, 71.9% vocational education, and 72.1% higher education.⁵⁹ Although there are no official figures regarding the language skills of students, all expert and non-expert interview respondents agreed that these skills are continuously improving.

Education

As already mentioned, the post-communist period saw a revival of early marriages, causing a higher drop-out rate for Azeri schoolgirls. Even though all interviewees agreed that the school dropout rate is diminishing and an

increasing number of young Azeri girls finishes schools and even continues higher education, the drop-out rate still remains higher for ethnic Azeris than other nationalities. The *Study of Social and Economic Conditions and Attitudes of Kvemo Kartli Population* from 2011 identified a lower involvement of Azeris in school education (93.4% compared to 98% for other groups). Despite a general unwillingness to justify absence from school, illness and ‘no desire to study’ were the most frequently used reasons for withdrawing from education in Marneuli (around 27%), with illness being stated as the main reason in Bolnisi (66.7%) and distant location of school in Dmanisi. Marriage was named as a reason only in Marneuli (9%), Dmanisi (11.5%) and Tetriskharo (6.7%).⁶⁰ However, regional experts such as Leila Suleimanova are convinced that marriage is one of the most frequent reasons for Azeri girls to leave school early. In fact, equal education for girls and boys is less valued among ethnic Azeris than among other ethnic groups: 71.6% of Azeris compared to 94% of other ethnic groups in the region agreed with the statement that receiving education is equally important for both boys and girls in a survey conducted by the Civil Development Agency together with UNDP. 23.2% of Azeri respondents think that education is more important for boys.⁶¹ Often, schools are not perceived as primarily educational institutions, but as places full of temptations (including the threat of abduction). In order to avoid “temptations” and maintain the girl’s premarital virginity, parents sometimes decide to take them out of school. However, as Leila Suleimanova emphasizes, by dropping out of school and getting married young girls lose any chance to find a job as they lack the most fundamental skills, noting that today even small supermarkets require basic computer skills and no longer hire completely unqualified staff.

Yet, Samira Ismayilova, chairwoman of the Azerbaijani Students’ Association of Georgia emphasizes that a negative attitude towards education for young girls is no longer the norm. Thanks to the state-funded program “one-plus-four” (instituted by the previous Georgian government) that offered one year of intensive Georgian language training and four years of fully funded university education to Azeri and Armenian students who passed the entrance examinations in their respective minority languages, 254 Azeri students entered Georgian universities in 2011 and 384 in 2012.⁶² Ismayilova, whose student association organized an extensive information campaign in 100 Azeri schools, highlights the importance of information in order to increase parents’ willingness to send their daughters to universities: “People in the regions live very isolated, they need to be introduced to what is going on outside their village.”⁶³ Yet, as Nargis Alieva from the Union of Azerbaijani Youth in Georgia remarks, even those girls who are eager to study in order to find a good job face the reality of a poorly developed economy and a lack of job opportunities in their region, forcing many well-educated young Azeris to migrate to Turkey, Russia or Azerbaijan. While the majorities (58%) of labor migrants in Kvemo Kartli are male, there is a considerable percentage of women (42%) who migrate to Greece, Italy or Turkey, while male migrants mostly choose post-Soviet countries.⁶⁴

2.3 Political participation

While about 53% of Georgia’s population is female, only 17 women have been elected to the parliament in the elections in 2012, accounting for 11.33% of MPs.⁶⁵ Although this is the highest number of female MPs since independence in 1991, women continue to be heavily underrepresented despite efforts made

by the Georgian government to increase female participation in political parties through financial incentives.⁶⁶

None of the current female MPs belongs to an ethnic minority, nor do any of the female ministers⁶⁷. In the past, the only minorities that had a better representation of their female members were Greeks and Abkhazians. No Azeri woman has ever served in parliament.⁶⁸ Currently there are three Azeri MPs, all men. Although it was difficult to track down the number of female candidates from the Azeri community, local experts emphasized that those women who were on the party list often did not know about their nomination. According to Leila Mamedova, women were pressured to accept their candidacy.⁶⁹ On the other hand, participants at a conference on the implementation of the „Win with Women Global Action Plan“⁷⁰ by the National Democratic Institute reported that those female candidates who were genuinely motivated, on the other hand, faced opposition from their male counterparts. However, Azeri students' representative Samira Ismayilova, who was a candidate for UNM, emphasized that – contrary to her expectation – she did not experience any difficulties or strange reactions.⁷¹

Ethnic minority women or women in general are traditionally better represented on the regional level. According to USAID, „women have fared slightly better at the local level and make up a larger proportion of local council (sakrebulo) members (11%) since „they are more likely to be known by the electorate in their city or town“.⁷² Regarding Kvemo Kartli, conflicting accounts of the number of female Azeri sakrebulo members were encountered. Some sources named three Azeri women in the sakrebulo, while others insisted that there is only one. The lack of visibility of female sakrebulo members is surprising, as even regional experts and NGO representatives were unaware of their

existence. This lack of information can be explained by the impression that women are often only formally members and do not fulfill a real function in the local council. Local experts complained that, in fact, most of the political work is done by the husband. During our research we were able to have a short meeting with one – or perhaps the only – Azeri sakrebulo deputy, who works as a school teacher and became a sakrebulo deputy „because people elected her“.⁷³ This and the fact that she was barely able to describe her work confirmed the suspicion that women's participation in politics remains largely formal.

However, experts remark that Kvemo Kartli has always been at the bottom regarding equal political participation of both genders. According to the Kvemo Kartli study conducted by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, „ethnic minorities are not involved in the current developments taking place in Kvemo Kartli region, which manifests in low awareness of different social issues, low level of involvement in the programs and low level of cooperation with government structures“.⁷⁴ Moreover, the study concludes that the general lack of interest in politics is even more widespread among women than men.⁷⁵ Leila Mamedova from the Union of Azerbaijani Youth of Georgia, on the other hand, insists that the stereotype of the Azeri woman in the kitchen in fact does not live up to reality, for Azeri women are „very active.“⁷⁶ All local experts report a normal participation of women in the 2012 parliamentary elections compared to the earlier periods when it was common for the man, as the head of the family, to take the passports of all eligible family members in order to vote on their behalf. Yet, despite such positive developments, it can be assumed that women do not vote fully independently, but according to the choice of the whole family. Nonetheless,

NGO representatives stress the positive tendency towards lively political discussions at home and in local communities and emphasize that there is no longer only one opinion per village. What remains are often mainly practical difficulties: during a training organized by the Union of Azerbaijani Women of Georgia in the parliamentary pre-election period 17 out of 20 participants were not able to complete the ballot paper correctly.⁷⁷

The lack of formal political involvement is in contrast to Azeri women's strong voice in the public sphere. There are several organizations engaging in gender issues, among them the Union of Azerbaijani Women in Georgia (Leila Suleimanova), the Union of Azerbaijani Youth in Georgia (Leila Mamedova) as well as the Azerbaijani Students' Association of Georgia (Samira Ismaylova). This confirms the general trend that women in Georgia predominate in the civil society sector. What first appears progressive can partly be interpreted as a confirmation of the stereotypical role of women as 'caretakers' due to their „traditional concern for social problems“⁷⁸. However, headed by strong but pragmatic Azeri women, these organizations not only enable a greater participation of Azeri women in the social, economic, political and cultural life from within the Azeri community itself, but also ensure that the needs of Azeri women do not remain unheard in the broader discussions on gender equality in Georgia.

III. ARMENIAN WOMEN IN GEORGIA

Armenian women also belong to the more vulnerable groups in Georgia, suffering from a high incidence of domestic violence linked to their geographical and social isolation. The common perception is that Armenian women are more conservative than ethnic Georgians, but

less so than members of the Azeri community, who are more constrained by their religious traditions and socialization.

This section assesses the situation of Armenian women in Georgia, residing in the remote and still not fully integrated region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, especially in the Armenian-dominated municipalities of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, as well as in the regional centre Akhaltsikhe, where approximately 37% of the population is Armenian. While there is another significant community of Armenians residing in Tbilisi – 7.6% of the city's total population according to the 2002 census – they are generally well integrated and therefore less pertinent to the present research.

3.1 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Domestic violence

According to the 2010 Reproductive Health Survey, 6% of Armenian respondents reported cases of physical violence, compared to 3.9% of ethnic Georgians and 8.9% of female Azeris. While Armenian women are more likely to be physically abused than Georgian ones (but less likely than Azeri women), they are on par with Georgians in terms of verbal abuse (see table in section 2.1). Importantly, the higher rate of physical abuse is not reflected in the cases of domestic violence reported to the police. According to statistics published by the Department of Information and Analysis of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the ratio of violence reported in Samtskhe-Javakheti (0.7 incident of domestic violence per 10 000 citizens) does not stand out when compared with the reporting ratio in Tbilisi (5.4) and Mtskheth-Mtianeti (3.4)⁷⁹. However, as mentioned before, one should take into account that rural women, long accustomed to gender-based discrimination and violence and with little exposure to mainstream

Georgian society, are less aware of the very notion of domestic violence and of its prohibition under Georgian law. They also tend to have a higher inhibition threshold to report violent acts within the family, considering to damage or threaten the reputation of their kin. The geographical distance and little trust in state authorities could be further reasons for Armenian women's hesitancy to consult the police in cases of domestic violence.

While a deficient knowledge of Georgian does not necessarily hinder Armenian women from approaching the police in Armenian-dominated regions where officials are likely to speak their language⁸⁰, it can still complicate women's access to information about services provided by the state, such as shelters for victims of domestic violence or crisis centers. According to an employee of the Akhaltsikhe crisis center led by the Tbilisi-based NGO 'Anti-Violence Network of Georgia' (AVNG), the proportion of ethnic Armenians looking for assistance at the crisis center is extremely low. There was not a single Armenian woman in the shelter near Akhaltsikhe at the time of our interview, and no more than three over the past five years⁸¹. She explained the reluctance to take advantage of anti-violence services through the "specific Armenian mentality," as well as a lack of information and an absence of trust. Some scholars argue that the Armenian understanding of the domestic realm differs from other Caucasian nationalities as the family additionally functions as a 'fortress' against cultural assimilation: "For Armenians, the family represents the centre of affective life and, no less importantly, the means by which they resisted cultural assimilation and physical destruction as a people through centuries of onslaught by Arabs, Mongols, Turks and other ethnically or religiously alien peoples. Countless proverbs express the centrality of the family to

ethnic 'survival', and the complementary of men's and women's roles in this joint endeavours [sic]."⁸² Yet, the habit of keeping silent about violent acts by a husband or partner (intimate partner violence, or IPV) is not particular to ethnic Armenians, but characteristic for women in rural areas across Georgia. According to the National Research on Violence against Women in Georgia "there is a very low percentage of [women] who seek help and share their experience outside of close social networks:" 3.2% of women who were victims of domestic violence reported talking to a priest, a mere 2% approached the police and only 1% sought help from a women's NGO.⁸³

Gender norms and power relations

As with the Azeris, the prevalence of domestic violence within the Armenian community is rooted in an inherently discriminatory power structure within the family. Armenian gender attitudes, which range from rather liberal to very conservative, rank somewhere in-between those of ethnic Georgians and Azeris. In 2004, the Institute for Policy Studies in Tbilisi published the study *Gender & Society in Samtskhe-Javakheti*, which explored the needs of women in the region. The fieldwork included an exercise with 8th-graders who were asked to write essays about the way they imagine their future ten-years ahead, which were then analyzed. The essays revealed more traditional ideas about the position of women among students from Armenian schools in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, who were more likely to discuss their marriage and future family than pupils in other parts of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Moreover, "Armenian [students] were much more exact and concrete in their plans, demonstrating stronger stereotypes, pragmatism and adherence to traditional values, while the Georgian writings were more focused on

patriotic feelings and general social problems.”⁸⁴ The report concluded that “there is a difference in the level of personal freedom women enjoy across these two ethnic groups, as the free movement of Armenian women is more restricted.”⁸⁵

The more recent *Reproductive Health Survey* confirms this divide between Armenians and Georgians in their ideas about gender roles: Armenians are much more likely to subscribe to traditional gender norms and stereotypes than ethnic Georgians. According to the survey only 60.2% of Armenian respondents think that “a woman can refuse sex if her husband has an STI (sexually transmitted infection)” compared to 78.8% of ethnic Georgians and 52.6% of Azeris. The statement “A good wife obeys her husband” is supported by 55.8% of Armenians, 84.9% of Azeris and 38.8% of ethnic Georgians. This again suggests that Armenian women rank in between Azeri and Georgian women in terms of (perceived) gender equality.⁸⁶ However, as the authors of *Gender & Society in Samtskhe-Javakheti* remark, it is not the ethnic profile as such, but the ethnic balance, which is decisive for the situation of Armenian women, as the freedom of Armenian women is more limited in Armenian-dominated Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki than in other regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti.⁸⁷

While the family honor requires women to be modest and subservient, there is still an agreement that Armenian women, like Azeri and Georgian women, sometimes exercise more power than it is formally recognized. As Tsira Meskhishvili, chairwoman of the Samtskhe-Javakheti association ‘Toleranti’ remarks, Armenian women are somehow suppressed and powerful at the same time. Women participate actively in projects and discussions and have a strong impact on their husband’s decisions. According to Meskhishvili, “women are active,

but somehow hold on to their own subordination.”⁸⁸ For scholar Nora Dudwick this phenomenon is not a paradox but captures an ‘organic relationship’ between man and women that is best expressed in the Armenian analogy of a married couple to a body, in which the man is the head and the woman the neck. As Dudwick explains, “people frequently point out that although the head supposedly makes the decisions and controls the body, in fact, women subtly control the head, for ‘as the neck turns, so turns the head’. Both proverbs stress the supportive and subordinate nature of women’s relationship to men.”⁸⁹

This stressful position is also reflected in the difficulty of reconciling civic involvement with the household duties traditionally assigned to Armenian women. With one exception, all participants in a focus group meeting with active women in Akhalkalaki explained that their dedication was only possible because they did not have a family. The only married woman at the table, on the other hand, characterized the unconditional support from her family as “exceptional”.⁹⁰ Yet, regarding younger generations, our interviewees observed first changes in traditional gender relations, indicating that young men are generally more open-minded and ready to take a share in the household. Pirusa Terregorian from the Union of Armenian Support, for instance, reported to see more and more men picking up their children from the kindergarten, “something, which would not have happened in the past.”⁹¹

Finally, it is interesting to observe that the statement “nothing is possible without your family” seems to apply not only to married but also to divorced women, as they rarely live on their own after separating but move back to their parental family. There they are again exposed to the controlling behavior of a man, be it the father or a brother. However, active women

agree that once a woman is successful in her profession, she will receive the necessary respect for her work: “People do not care about words here, it’s all about deeds. If you are a successful woman no one will really have a problem with you.”⁹²

Early marriages and bride abductions

While early marriages have the highest frequency among ethnic Azeris, they are also rather a common phenomenon among Armenians, as was illustrated by the essay exercise for the 2004 study *Gender & Society in Samtskhe-Javakheti*, in which Armenian girls in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki tend to express their negative attitude towards early marriage, displaying awareness that this would prevent them from further professional development.⁹³ Official GEOSTAT data from 2011 for the whole region of Samtskhe-Javakheti lists 32 underage persons who got married, with only one of them male (seventeen-years old) and the rest girls, 14 of them sixteen-years old and 17 seventeen-years old. The overall situation in Samtskhe-Javakheti reflects national trends, with most persons (male and female) getting married in their 20ies. While the numbers of marriages stated in the *UNFPA Reproductive Health Survey* give no indication about age and ethnicity, some conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the information related to fertility. Judging by fertility rates, which the survey disaggregated by ethnicity and age, and keeping in mind that few pregnancies occur outside marriage, it is reasonable to surmise that Armenian women tend to marry later than Azeri women.⁹⁴ This trend was also observed by our interviewees, including NGO leaders, a school principal, Sakrebulo members and local residents.

While local residents and experts agree that the tradition of early marriages as well as

the practice of bride abductions is in decline, our field research in Javakheti strengthened the impression that the fear of bride abduction is still widespread. That this fear does not remain abstract, but can have a real impact on young women’s life was illustrated by the example of an Armenian female student in Tbilisi, who had to discontinue university for one semester due to a male student who behaved like a potential bride kidnapper. After spending one semester with her parents in Akhalkalaki she returned to Tbilisi and finished university.

During a meeting with women’s activists in Akhalkalaki we also came across the phenomenon of voluntary kidnapping. One woman reported that her daughter ran away with her boyfriend at the age of 17, just few months before graduating from school. We were told that she now lives with her husband’s family, suffering from the discriminating behavior of her mother-in-law and her husband’s grandmother. As her mother explained, young girls tend to see early marriage as an opportunity to have a legitimate sexual relationship and often fail to consider the potential long term consequences of their actions, such as subordination by the mother-in-law. Overall, the idea that women are predestined to marry is still widespread, even among active Armenian women: “A woman should get married, but not too early. She should finish her education first and *then* get married.”⁹⁵

3.2 ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Employment

Rural inhabitants of Samtskhe-Javakheti largely depend on subsistence agriculture for their financial livelihood. While the region is Georgia’s largest producer of potatoes, and as such holds potential for economic development, a number of obstacles such as irrigation

problems and a lack of infrastructure and farming technology have impeded progress. The Akhalkalaki municipality, mostly populated by ethnic Armenians, is largely reliant on such subsistence farming, posing a significant obstacle to their integration into the Georgian economy, and Georgian society at large. The situation is equally troubling for Armenians in Ninotsminda, whose main source of income are remittance payments from family members working abroad. The situation in the urban center Akhaltsikhe is somewhat more promising: here the majority of people are able to sustain themselves financially through wage-based labor. In recent years the government has undertaken efforts to improve the economic situation in Samtskhe-Javakheti – irrigation problems are being tackled and transportation projects are being pursued, such as the road between Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki, the Akhalkalaki-Ninotsminda-Tsalka-Tbilisi road and the railway from Tbilisi to Akhalkalaki.⁹⁶ The extent to which these endeavors will improve the situation of the still-isolated Armenian communities, however, remains to be seen.

The 2004 survey on gender and society in Samtskhe-Javakheti notes that women-headed households in Samtskhe-Javakheti were more likely to assess their financial situation negatively.⁹⁷ Rural Armenian women in this region are likely to bear the main share of the economic burden, as they are responsible for tending to the livestock.⁹⁸ They are also in charge of marketing and selling most of the produce. As a report by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation indicates, women here carry the double burden of being expected to run their households and look after their children and yet be full-time breadwinners as well.⁹⁹ They perform both demanding reproductive and productive roles. One woman

cited in the survey remarked: “I am the man and the woman in my family when my husband goes to work.”¹⁰⁰ The situation is even more difficult for those rural women whose husbands left the country seeking seasonal labor mainly in other post-Soviet countries. A large share of labor migration abroad occurred between 1996 and 2004, when circular migration was the primary economic strategy for many members of ethnic minorities.¹⁰¹ This is particularly the case for ethnic Azeri and Armenians, where labor migration is predominately male, seasonal, and oriented towards Russia. Here remittance payments are often relied on as the primary sources of income, keeping the receiving families from the poverty line. Samtskhe-Javakheti has the highest rate of remittance-receiving households in Georgia.¹⁰² According to Nazel Demorchian, chairwoman of Women for Peaceful Georgia, there are villages in which almost all men of working-age have left, while their wives need to take over all tasks involved in agricultural production, in addition to taking care for their families.¹⁰³ This heavy burden combined with infrastructural shortcomings place those women in a particularly vulnerable position. This was confirmed during an ECMI Caucasus meeting organized in Akhalkalaki, where women from the village Aragava mentioned difficulties they face as a consequence of living without husbands, forcing them to work in the fields together with their children. It is therefore not surprising that most of their complaints concern insufficient infrastructure such as the inadequate irrigation system, incomplete gas supply, lack of leisure clubs for young people, bad conditions of schools, as well as pressing issues affecting their agricultural livelihood such as the high price of fertilizer. However, despite the difficulties they face, the meeting highlighted the exceptional ability of rural women to deal with their

problems independently and within the community.¹⁰⁴

Armenian women in the local urban centers, on the other hand, work in traditionally female occupation, e.g. as teachers, nurses or shop assistants, but most recently also bank assistants. Employment opportunities, however, are not only curtailed by discriminatory gender norms, but by a general lack of jobs concerning both men and women. While self-employment might offer a solution to that problem, women's activists from the region emphasize the difficulties women face if they want to engage in more professional economic activities. One woman who participated in an economic empowerment program told us that the realization of her business idea failed due to the adverse, male-dominated environment. Yet, in general, only few women are aware of the existence of micro credit institutions in their region.¹⁰⁵

Apart from traditional gender norms, the lack of adequate Georgian language skills was named as one of the main impediments for Armenian women to find employment in the local administration. Figures from an ECMI report from 2009 indicated the highest level of lack of language skills among Armenians in Akhalkalaki (47.2%), followed by Ninotsminda (28.2%) and Akhaltsikhe (6.7%).¹⁰⁶

Education

As findings by the Civil Development Agency reveal, Armenians are less conservative in regards to equal access to education for boys and girls than Azeris, but less open than ethnic Georgians, with 15.9% of Armenian respondents agreeing that education is more important for boys, compared to 4.3% of Georgian and 23.2% of Azeri respondents.¹⁰⁷

According to a school principal in the village Tskaltbila and also a sakrebulo member

in Akhaltsikhe, the dropout rate of Armenian girls has decreased over the past few years and young Armenian girls are now more likely to finish secondary school than before. Thanks to the government program “one-plus-four” the number of Armenian students enrolled in university has increased. According to official numbers, 75 Armenian students participated in the program in 2010, 179 in 2011 and 191 in 2012. Despite the non-availability of gender disaggregated data it can be assumed that the number of female students has also increased. As one interviewed school principal remarks, there is even a tendency towards an increasing gender imbalance regarding young men, with more girls enrolled in higher education than boys and the number of girls leaving the region to study in the capital becoming higher.¹⁰⁸ However, a comparison with the number of Azeri students enrolled in the government program reveals that the participation of Armenians is significantly lower, as the share of Azeri students rose to 384 in 2012, compared to 191 Armenian participants.¹⁰⁹ Active women in Akhalkalaki weigh in that the quality of teaching is still poor in some areas of the region, and it continues to adversely affect both girls' and boys' chances to pass the university entrance exam.¹¹⁰ First successes of the “one-plus-four” governmental program should not obscure the overall picture: young members of ethnic minorities remain underrepresented in tertiary education and those who choose to attend university are likely to alienate themselves from fellow members of their native communities. The latter especially holds true for minority women – Azeri and Armenian alike – who, at least nominally, have every right and opportunity to enter higher education, but in doing so are bound to violate the value system of their families.

3.3 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

No Armenian woman currently serves in the Georgian parliament, compared to three Armenian men, and there has only been one female Armenian MP in the past.¹¹¹ Their representation is slightly better in the regional councils, with three Armenian women being members of the sakrebulo in Akhaltsikhe and one in Ninotsminda. Overall there are four female Armenian sakrebulo members in Samtskhe-Javakheti. Strikingly there is not a single female sakrebulo member in Akhalkalaki, even though the share of ethnic Armenian residents is over 90%. According to our interview partners, there was one female Armenian head of the sakrebulo in the past and one Armenian woman in the sakrebulo in Akhalkalaki in 2006, who was “not active”.¹¹² The head of the local NGO Toleranti named the current system of self-government as one of the impediments to genuine political commitment: women in the sakrebulo must be party members, binding them to the opinion of their party. An interview with two sakrebulo members (one of them a deputy) confirmed the lack of personal motivation, for both were “invited” to join the sakrebulo. One of them told us that, “they wanted me to become a member, so I said yes.” As a secretary in the sakrebulo for many years, becoming politically involved “just seemed natural”.¹¹³ Both interviewees emphasized that their work is perceived in a positive way by men in their community. One was strongly supported by her husband, while the other one emphasized that their male colleagues treat them in a polite way. Both women did not seem particularly aware of gender issues; however, one of them asked us to organize an information session on women’s right in her village at the end of the interview, suggesting that women show an increased interest in politics and tend to attend political discussions more often than men.

Compared to Akhaltsikhe, the role of Armenian women is even more limited in Akhalkalaki. As already mentioned, the local sakrebulo has currently no female member, contradicting the assumption that political positions are easier accessible for ethnic minority women in regions where their nationality forms the overall majority of the population. In Akhalkalaki, where 80% (25 out of 31) of the sakrebulo members are ethnic Armenians there is not a single woman, while in Ninotsminda, where 94% of the population are Armenians, there is only one female member. As stated by a representative from the Javakheti Citizens’ Forum, one of the fundamental problems for female sakrebulo members is that they are not able to freely articulate their ideas and opinions in the male-dominated local assembly. The leader of “Women for a Peaceful Georgia” and a candidate in the local elections in 2010 stressed the difficult environment for women willing to become politically active. In regard to her own candidacy, male members of the sakrebulo went as far as trying to convince her to withdraw her candidacy. She frequently had to face questions like “What do you need that for?” and “Why do you want to make your life more complicated than necessary?”¹¹⁴

All women interviewed in Akhalkalaki underlined the need for quotas to end the nominal candidacies by women. However, they also pointed to a more fundamental problem, namely that both men and women remain largely detached from the political processes and uninterested in political questions. According to our interviewees, “women cannot be forced to become active, but have to wish to engage in politics themselves.”¹¹⁵ When asked about their own ambitions to enter the formal sphere of politics, they emphasized their unwillingness to associate themselves with a political party.

Especially in the villages, a lack of interest in political affairs is largely determined by a limited access to information in minority languages. As the *Study of Multi-Ethnic Society in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti* observed, almost two-thirds of the non-Georgian population of Samtskhe-Javakheti receives information in Armenian and Russian, with only 35% in Georgian. Although there are at least two local channels that transmit news in Armenian in Russian, they do not cover all parts of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Yet, there are two times more Internet users in Samtskhe-Javakheti (23.9%) than in Kvemo Kartli (11.3%), with the most popular Internet source being ‘Odnoklassniki’ (Classmates) among non-Georgians.¹¹⁶

All politically active women candidates interviewed in Akhalkalaki underlined the lack of information and awareness as one of the biggest problems during their pre-election campaign projects in 2012. Some experienced several times interferences by men during their information campaigns, causing the campaigners to limit attendance at events to women only. All interviewees mentioned shortcomings in the election observations, allowing cases when men voted on behalf of their female family members. However, these cases could not be verified.

Yet, with few women’s organisations or NGOs with a gender focus the concerns of Armenian women certainly have a voice in the public sphere. Compared to Kvemo Kartli, NGOs in Samtskhe-Javakheti are still less present and active and there is no Armenian women’s organization with same professionalism and experience as the Union of Azerbaijani Women of Georgia.¹¹⁷ This could either be attested to an absence of political and social motivation among Armenian women, or – more positively – to the comparatively better situation of Armenian women who simply might not see the need for such organized forums.

IV. GENDER ISSUES OF SMALLER MINORITIES

This section considers the situation of women in Georgia’s less populous minorities. The Azeris and Armenians together account for over 10% of the Georgian population. The third largest minority are ethnic Russians (1.55%), followed by even smaller minorities such as Ossetians, Yezidis (0.42%), Greeks (0.35%), Ukrainians, Kists, and Roma.¹¹⁸ The present discussion will be rather superficial at this stage, as not much attention has been paid to those groups. The attempt of this section is to signal the issues by specifically looking at gender relations in the following groups: Kist, Yezidi, Roma, and Ossetians. For the purpose of this study the first three of those are most interesting, as they remain culturally isolated and as such are clearly distinguishable as ethnic minorities. While gender problems occur in the remaining groups, they are harder to grasp as minority-specific problems due to the strong integration on one hand and the conflict situation between Georgia and South Ossetia that have complicated their situation on the other. A full-fledged discussion of the social relations in those minorities, specifically in regards to gender, would require an assessment both of those conflicts and of their relationship with the countries and regions with which they identify.¹¹⁹

4.1 OSSETIAN WOMEN

While Ossetians living outside the conflict zone of South Ossetia have almost assimilated to the Georgian majority, they experienced discrimination in the aftermath of the war, often branded as ‘separatist’ and sympathizer.¹²⁰ The Georgian-Russian 2008 war thus signified a step backwards for an ethnic group previously well-embedded in the Georgian society and reinforced the tendency not to display their

distinct cultural identity. Roughly one-tenth of Ossetians currently reside in the Republic of Georgia. The 2002 census estimates the number of Ossetians living in Georgia (excluding the autonomous region of South Ossetia) at around 38000, although the ECMI estimates the current number to be much lower (26000 in 2009). Most Ossetians speak fluent Georgian; older members also speak Ossetian.

According to Mzia Kochlaeva from the International Association of Ossetian Women Alaneli, domestic violence is as big a problem for Ossetian women as it is for the rest of the population of rural Georgia. Ossetian women mostly engage in domestic work, as well as agriculture. Despite a general low level of economic activity among Ossetian women, a proportionally higher level of activity was reported among Ossetian women in Akhmeta and Lagodekhi.

However, as it was emphasized, the biggest grievance for Ossetian women is the “loss of their homeland, which has left them torn between North Ossetia, South Ossetia and Georgia”.¹²¹ The situation of Ossetian women is therefore mostly discussed in the context of conflict resolution. However, despite Georgia’s efforts to increase women’s participation in the peace process through the introduction of the National Action Plan on ‘Women, Peace and Security,’ experts note that the number of female participants has decreased recently and criticize the Georgian government for an undue focus on figures rather than on the actual influence of female participants.¹²² Much of the work of Ossetian organizations is therefore devoted to support Ossetian women in dealing with the burden of the conflict.

There is a certain number of Ossetian IDP women from mixed families who are spread across Georgia’s various IDP settlements, although there is no specific statistical data

available. There is also no evidence about a higher rate of domestic violence among IDPs; qualitative research, however, suggests that IDP women belong to the most vulnerable group regarding gender-based violence due to the high psychological pressure they are exposed to.¹²³

4.2 KISTS

Kists are descendants of ethnic Chechens and Ingush who migrated from the North Caucasus to Georgia starting from the mid-18th century. Numbers of Kists residing in Georgia are estimated at 8.000, most of them living in the remote Pankisi gorge.¹²⁴ They distinguish themselves from other Nakh-speaking peoples such as Chechens and Ingush by their customs and traditions similar to those of Eastern Georgian mountaineers. However, with the arrival of refugees from the Chechen war, the previously well-integrated Kists experienced an identity crisis. The Chechen influence made younger Kists to identify as Chechen, whereas older generations hold on to the distinct cultural character of the Kist community that used to prioritize rule and historical traditions over strict interpretation of Islamic religion. With the arrival of the Chechen refugees a more orthodox understanding of Islam began to spread in the Pankisi Gorge, fueling inter-generational conflict about traditional practices and social norms. In 2011, observers estimated that between 60% and 80% of young men have joined Salafism, an ultraconservative form of Sunnism.¹²⁵ This trend has had a severe impact on the lives of Kist women in Pankisi by exacerbating the already existing discriminative practices towards women within the Kist community.

Information on the situation of Kist women is comparatively easy to obtain due to the strong support of the international community. The Kakheti Regional Development



Foundation (KRDF) hosts three women's clubs in the Duisi village and offers vocational trainings, as well as small grants programs for both men and women. According to KRDF, Kist women are very actively involved in the activities and have successfully participated in a small grants program that was organized by KRDF between 2009 and 2010. Roughly half of 120 proposed projects that were granted by KRDF were conducted by and for women.

However, despite these positive developments, Kist women are strongly dependent on their husbands' and families' will, as was demonstrated by the fact that participation in the women's club had to be pre-approved by the husbands.¹²⁶ Kist women's choices are widely determined by traditional rules (adat), for example depriving them of the right to independently choose their marriage partner.¹²⁷ Moreover, as most conflicts within the community are resolved by the council of the elders, Kist women are not usually afforded the opportunity to appeal to Georgian law in case of divorces or domestic violence, leaving them vulnerable to the often discriminating decisions of the male members of their society.

Due to the problems raised in the women's clubs, KRDF supported the establishment of a 'council of women elders' to counterbalance the traditional male-dominated council of elders. Consisting of fifteen well-respected women from twelve villages, the council aims to help solve women's problems within the scope of traditional customary regulations. As already mentioned, those problems mainly relate to domestic violence, as well as questions related to divorce and child custody. In cooperation with the council of elders, the women's council has so far been dealing with nine cases of domestic violence, out of which six were decided in favor of the woman.

Many of the new problems Kist women face are linked to the spread of more radical Islam particularly popular among young men. As was expressed by local members of the Salafi movement in Duisi during an ECMI Caucasus research in 2011, "women should be covered, besides hands and face, and should 'belong' to their husbands".¹²⁸ According to ECMI Caucasus research, young male Kists tend to study in religious institutions in Arab countries or Turkey and later return to Pankisi to marry.¹²⁹ Identifying unemployment, lack of development prospects and disillusion as the main reasons for this trend, many Kist women expressed the wish for more sport and leisure facilities for the youth in their villages.

Due to the involvement of international organisations, women in Pankisi have become increasingly active in the NGOs in their region, offering them a forum to discuss their problems and find common solutions. This, however, cannot hide the fact that many Kist women face severe psychological constraints when talking about their problems and fears. A need for increased psychologist assistance was raised as one of the main issues during a discussion in Duisi. While the ambition to solve women's problems within the existing framework of customary regulations is understandable to a certain extent, it should be taken into account that this tendency restricts the access to legal services of the Georgian authorities that should be made available to all citizens.

4.3 YEZIDI WOMEN

Estimates of the number of Yezidi Kurds currently residing in Georgia vary, but are usually put between 6,000 and 12,000.¹³⁰ Yezidis are one of the most economically disadvantaged minorities and often confined to menial jobs, such as street sweeping and basic agriculture. Tbilisi-based Yezidis are, on the

whole, much more integrated in Georgian society than their countryside kin. Yezidi organizations in Georgia and abroad have deplored the massive outmigration of Georgian Yezidis, as well as discrimination by the police, and warn of a complete disappearance of Yezidi culture in Georgia.

Yezidi women continue to suffer from systemic gender-based discrimination inherent to the caste system, which forbids marriage outside their sub-caste, as well as marriage to a non-Yezidi.¹³¹ Women who break these rules are no longer considered part of the ethnic group, with ties to their family and places of origin severed. Because the Yezidi religion, which combines Islamic, Christian and Zoroastrian elements, is transferred through patrimonial line, the situation for men has traditionally been less strict, as long as their non-Yezidi wives were willing to convert. The Yezidi practice of arranged marriages between young men and their first parallel patrilineal cousin is still practiced, although precise numbers are not available.¹³² Dowry payments are still common and exert financial pressure on the grooms' family. Observance of strict endogamy has only started to decline slightly in recent years due to the reduced pool of culturally acceptable marriage partners in the shrinking community. Early marriages remain commonplace, and domestic violence is endemic.¹³³

International organizations, such as the Hanns Seidel Foundation have remarked on the persistence of traditional marriage and gender norms among Georgian Yezidi even as Georgian society as a whole has made significant headway towards liberalization and gender equality.¹³⁴ Few Yezidi women are allowed to attend school, and are often prohibited from leaving the house once they are married.¹³⁵ During an interview with the Independent League of Yezidi-Kurdish Women of Georgia (which has about 30

members, both male and female), Lili Safarova, head of the organization, mentioned slight improvements in the situation of Yezidi women, who are increasingly emerging as a sole, or main, financial contributors of their families, somewhat strengthening their position at least in the domestic sphere.¹³⁶ They are showing interest in national political issues, although trust in the democratic process remains low and most women abstain from voting. Despite these signs of improvement, Dutch supported women's NGO Mama Cash – one of the main financial backers of the Independent League – concludes about the results of prevalent gender norms in the community that “it is a vicious circle of violence, oppression, isolation, lack of education and capacity building. It also results in economic, emotional and practical dependence of women from their families and husbands and exclusion of women from any decision making bodies.”¹³⁷ What makes the situation of Yezidi women particularly troubling is that they inhabit a belief system that precludes adaptation to changing circumstances. Even small changes that would benefit women (such as allowing them to marry outside their group or migrate to more economically advanced regions of Georgia) are easily seen as wholesale threats to the ‘Yezidi way of life.’

4.4 ROMA WOMEN

Roma women, belonging to the most vulnerable individuals in Georgian society, share many of the problems Yezidi women are dealing with. ECMI expert Elena Proshikian, herself a member of the Roma community, estimates the number of Romani families who have successfully integrated into Georgian society to be very low.¹³⁸ Persons of Roma background began arriving in Georgia in the early 19th century, but were better integrated (and less easily distinguished) during Soviet times. Today

Roma communities are spread across Georgia. Because most of Georgian Roma have no personal documents and are hard to reach, available numbers should be read cautiously. The Public Defender, which in recent years has begun looking into the group, estimates the total number of Roma living in Georgia at 1500. Most Georgian Roma speak Russian, several dialects of Romani, and Georgian in the case of younger members of the community. School attendance and access to health care remains very low, partially because many Roma do not have Georgian identification documents. Many Roma settlements have no running water and/or electricity. A 2008 ECMI assessment of the Roma Community in Georgia shows that the Roma community suffers from extreme poverty and marginalization, with problems ranging from unemployment, lacking access to education and health care, lack of appropriate police protection to general isolation from the larger Georgian society.¹³⁹

While there is no report specifically dealing with the situation of Roma women in Georgia, relevant information regarding their status and role can be inferred from the general literature. With the majority of men unemployed and staying at home, women carry the main economic burden. Economic activities on which Roma communities in Georgia subsist – small-scale sale of goods and begging – are largely undertaken by women, including children. As the 2008 ECMI report notes, practical problems such as food shortage and housing issues are related to the prevalence of very young marriages and high birthrates.¹⁴⁰ Many of the settlements are largely populated by very young couples, including teenagers, and their children. This points to the multiple roles of Roma women: not only are they responsible for the livelihood of their (often large) families and often cast into illegality, but they are also cast

into childrearing and married life during their most formative and vulnerable years. School attendance is particularly low among girls and young women, contributing to the vicious circle of lack of education and subsequently opportunities for employment. Domestic violence is widespread, but tabooed by the community.¹⁴¹ Unlike women in other ethnic minorities, Romani girls and young women do not even have the support of their own community, dispersed and with the old community structures shattered, to fall back on. Because Georgian Roma display virtually no unity or cohesion beyond their immediate families, Romani women – unlike their Azeri and Armenian counterparts, who are at least recognized and integrated within their own communities – live poor, anonymous, and often short lives.

V. CONCLUSION

The foregoing chapters explained the situation of women in some of Georgia's ethnic minorities and highlighted the gender-based discrimination, and resulting problems, they face. A number of concluding remarks about the overall findings of this study, and the larger questions it raises, are warranted.

First, discrimination of women manifests itself in similar problems, even when dealing with culturally and religiously distinct (and divergent) minorities. As attested by quantitative surveys (in the case of the Azeri and Armenian minorities), as well as anecdotal evidence (as in the case of the smaller minorities), domestic violence continues to plague minority women of all ethnicities. Despite the fact that an objective assessment of the prevalence of domestic violence is complicated by psychological and sociological factors, it is widely assumed that minority women are more likely to experience abuse by



their husband or partner, and less likely to recognize and report that abuse than ethnic Georgians. Compared to mainstream society they also marry and have children early, sometimes in their mid-teens. Domestic and social barriers limit their professional and educational opportunities, and perpetuate the cycle of discrimination.

This phenomenon – that women in different minorities encounter similar problems – is explicable both through a convergence of traditional beliefs about the role of women across cultures, and through the fact that all of the minority communities surveyed (as distinct as they are from each other) are at home in the same ‘mainstream’ society, affecting them in similar ways. Minority women in Georgia for a large part live in culturally and geographically isolated rural areas remaining widely untouched by the liberalization and Westernization of Georgian society that occurred in the past two decades. It is not because their cultures are similar per se, but because their communities are similarly detached from mainstream progress and thus unable to shake the historically engrained conservative value systems, that minority women (be they Azeri, Armenian, Roma, or Yezidi) all encounter discrimination and violence. The urban-rural divide, for example in the incidence of domestic violence and the absence of economic opportunities, demonstrates that ethnic Georgian women in areas that are isolated for political, economic, geographic, or other non-ethnic reasons, are often struggling with similar problems as women from ethnic minorities.¹⁴² This complex interplay of different factors shows that in some cases ethnic minority women do not only face a ‘double burden’, as the title of this paper suggests, but even a ‘triple’ burden of spatial isolation (leading to limited access to economic resources and state services in rural areas),

gender discrimination, and the disadvantages and issues related to their ethnic communities.

However, as similar as the problems of women from different ethnic communities might be, there are nevertheless groups whose distinct ethnic identity is based on essentially discriminatory social and cultural norms, as in the case of the Yezidi and Romani community. This raises the important but admittedly uneasy question to what extent group-level minority rights should be seen to trump the actual and very immediate problems of women in some of the most vulnerable minority communities. The case of the Yezidis highlights this issue: sometimes advances in women’s rights will come at the cost of cultural identity (or even cultural disappearance), and vice versa. To be sure, the aims of strengthening women and preserving cultural particularities are not always strictly exclusionary (as it appears to be the case with the Yezidis), but it is important to keep in mind that they can easily come into conflict.

The presence and vigor of politically and socially active minority women, many of whom were interviewed for this report, provides some reason for optimism, indicating potential progress even in communities where the on-the-ground situation of women has so far stagnated. Yet, one ought not to misunderstand the ideas and opinions of women’s organisations and active individuals as fully representative for their communities. Nevertheless, their examples demonstrate that advancements in gender equality are closely linked to the willingness and opportunities to further integrate into the Georgian society. Proficiency in Georgian appears to be a key factor in this regard. Many of our interviewees and contact persons were proud of their ability to participate in both the public life of their country and their national minority community. Their social, economic and political participation has empowered them with



a perhaps more critical but also more conscious and self-confident understanding of the traditions and values that underpin their communities.

Given the complexity of power relations within families and minority communities, the long-term success and effectiveness of measures undertaken by international organizations, local NGOs and the Georgian government will also depend on the engagement and empowerment of the various actors involved, including men and mothers-in-law. As husbands, community leaders, policemen, judges, religious and political figures, men exercise enormous authority over women's lives. Hence, achieving greater equality between men and women requires boys and men to critically reflect and re-evaluate those aspects of traditional notions of masculinity that perpetuate the vulnerability of women and prevent respectful relationships.

While developments in gender equality are certainly part of a greater transformational process of the social, political and economic context, more immediate measures are needed to facilitate and ensure the success of this long-term process. The Georgian government needs to increase its efforts to integrate and empower minority women and reduce the rural-urban

divide through specifically tailored educational programs and awareness campaigns, gender quotas for political parties, as well as the provision of state-funded reproductive health facilities, shelters and crisis centers for the victims of domestic violence in all regions of the country. Georgia's progressive legislation in regard to gender issues is largely due to the pressure of the international community and an effective legislation will to a great extent depend on the government's willingness to take responsibility and an understanding of gender equality as an integral step in the process of democratization. Furthermore, it is vital that the government improves its data collection in order to develop evidence-based policies. Only a nation-wide data collection that takes into account the interplay of various factors, including gender, location, level of education, age and ethnicity, will provide an adequate basis for effective state policies. Additional research is furthermore necessary in regard to smaller and most vulnerable women, especially Roma and Yezidi women.¹⁴³



Appendix

List of Interviewed Persons

Nargis Alieva, Union of the Azerbaijani Youth in Georgia
Sveda Alizade, Sakrebulo deputy and teacher, Marneuli
Naira Bepieva, Caucasian Mosaic
Alla Bezhentseva, Union of Russian Women of Georgia
Nazel Demorchian, Women for a Peaceful Georgia
Kelim Gumbatov, Union of Azerbaijani Women in Georgia
Anna Imedashvili, Kakheti Regional Development Foundation (KRDF)
Samira Ismayilova, Azerbaijani Students' Association of Georgia
Mzia Kochlaeva, International Association of Ossetian Women "Alaneli"
Marekhi Kirtadze, Anti-Violence Network of Georgia, Akhaltsikhe
Larisa, intern at Javakheti Citizens' Forum
Leila Mamedova, Union of the Azerbaijani Youth in Georgia
Paitsar Manasian, Sakrebulo deputy, Akhaltsikhe (v. Sadzeli)
Seda Melkumian, Javakheti Citizens' Forum (JCF)
Tsira Meskhishvili, "Toleranti" – The Regional Association of Samtskhe-Javakheti
Sveda Nkhapetian, Sakrebulo member and school principal, Akhaltsikhe (v. Tskaltbila)
Elena Proshikian, ECMI Caucasus
Silva Sadojan, Javakheti Citizens' Forum (JCF)
Lili Safarova, Independent League of Yezidi-Kurdish Women of Georgia
Leila Suleimanova, Union of Azerbaijani Women in Georgia
Pirusa Tergregorian, Union of Armenian Support
Jagubov Tschingiskhan (and family), village Kvemo Bolnisi

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Notes

¹ I would like to thank Sopho Kuprashvili for her invaluable assistance with research and interviews, especially with translations from Georgian.

² The World Economic Forum's Gender Index currently ranks Georgia 86th out of 135 countries, compared to 60th out of 86 countries in the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI).

³ See Parliament of Georgia, *Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia About Approving the 2011-2013 Action Plan for Implementation of Gender Equality*, 2011. Available at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/AdvanceVersions/GeorgiaAnnexVI.pdf>.

⁴ The 2008 *Law on Domestic Violence* enables police officers to issue restrictive orders and individuals to apply to court judges for protection orders against abuses. See *Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection and Support of Domestic Violence Victims*, 2008, Republic of Georgia. Available at <http://www.legislationline.org/documents/id/16680>.

⁵ 'Sakhli' operates one shelter in Tbilisi, while those in the regions are run by the Tbilisi-based 'Anti-Violence Network of Georgia.' This network includes two shelters (Tbilisi, Akhaltsikhe) and eleven crisis centers in Tbilisi, Gurjaani, Zugdidi, Ozurgeti, Mtskheta, Gori, Ambrolauri, Mestia, Akhaltsikhe, Batumi, and Marneuli.

⁶ Parliament of Georgia, *Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia About Approving the 2011-2013 Action Plan for Implementation of Gender Equality*.

⁷ *Action Plan on Measures to Prevent and Combat Domestic Violence and Protect Domestic Violence Victims 2009-2010*. Available at <http://sgdatabse.unwomen.org/searchDetail.action?measureId=34243&baseHREF=country&baseHREFId=542>.

⁸ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Georgia, CEDAW/C/GEO/CO/3*, §10, 31, 25 August 2006. Available at [http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/CEDAW.C.GEO.CO.3.En?Opendocument](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/CEDAW.C.GEO.CO.3.En?Opendocument).

⁹ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Combined fourth and fifth periodic reports of States parties. Georgia, CEDAW/C/GEO/4-5*, § 9-10, 26 June 2012. Available at http://www.bayefsky.com/reports/georgia_cedaw_c_geo_4_5_2012_adv.pdf.

¹⁰ According to a 2011 study by the Civil Development Agency, only 2.3% of the Azeri population in Kvemo Kartli regard Azerbaijan as their homeland. See Civil Development Agency, *Study of Multi-Ethnic Society in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti*, 2011. Available at <http://kvemokartli.ge/files/files/kvleva%20eng1.pdf>.

¹¹ National Center for Disease Control and Public Health in Georgia, Georgian Ministry of Labor Health and Social Affairs, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Atlanta, USA), UNFPA, USAID, and UNICEF, *Reproductive Health Survey Georgia*, 2010, p. 73. Available at:

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¹² National Center for Disease Control and Public Health in Georgia *et al.*, *Reproductive Health Survey*, p. 310.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

¹⁴ See Marine Chitashvili, Nino Javakhishvili, Luiza Arutiunov, Lia Tsuladze, Sophio Chachanidze, *National Research on Domestic Violence against Women in Georgia* (Tbilisi: ACT Research and Centre for Social Sciences, 2010), p. 15. Available at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/AdvanceVersions/GeorgiaAnnexX.pdf>.

¹⁵ See Department of Information and Analysis of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Georgia, *Domestic violence, domestic conflicts and juveniles 2007-2011*, 2012. Available at http://www.police.ge/uploads/images/2012/Domestic_violence_domestic_conflicts_and_juveniles_ENG.pdf.

¹⁶ Methodological deficiencies, such as varying, and seemingly arbitrary, timespans make meaningful comparisons difficult. They describe hard-to-explain trends such as a sharp decrease in domestic violence (from 432 to 64) between 2007 and 2009, followed by a sharp increase to 257 in 2007, suggesting unreliability.

¹⁷ The survey was undertaken with a high degree of professionalism, involving large teams of surveyors, and reviews by national and international panels and experts. Its large representative probability sample (13,363 households) make it the most reliable undertaking of its kind, carried out according to international standards. Sample selection relied on a stratified multistage sampling design and was carried out in two stages, ensuring reliable results also in the different categories covered (e.g. regional, economic, educational, ethnic).

¹⁸ Chitashvili *et al.*, *National Research on Violence against Women in Georgia*, p. 71.



¹⁹ See Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, *Study of Social and Economic Conditions and Attitudes of Kvemo Kartli Population*, 2011, pp. 159 and 167. Available at http://www.swiss-cooperation.admin.ch/georgia/en/Home/DOCUMENTS_PUBLICATIONS.

²⁰ See National Center for Disease Control and Public Health in Georgia *et al.*, *Reproductive Health Survey Georgia*, p. 217.

²¹ According to the traditional family pattern, the daughter-in-law is obliged to move into the husband's household, holding the lowest position within the family hierarchy.

²² ECMI Interview with Leila Suleimanova, head of the Union of Azerbaijani Women of Georgia, Tbilisi, December 2012.

²³ Chitashvili *et al.*, *National Research on Domestic Violence against Women in Georgia*, p. 67.

²⁴ ECMI Interview with Nargis Alieva, deputy chairwoman of the Union of the Azerbaijani Youth in Georgia, Marneuli, February 2013.

²⁵ [Farideh Heyat Nfa](#), *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan* (London: Routledge: 2002), p. 62.

²⁶ The term 'patrilocality' refers to a social system in which a married couple lives with (or near) the husband's family.

²⁷ It should be taken into account that early marriages might be conducted in mosques and are therefore not officially registered. See OECD, *Social Institutions & Gender Index (SIGI), Georgia*, 2012. Available at <http://genderindex.org/country/georgia>.

²⁸ ECMI Interview with Leila Suleimanova, chairwoman of the Union of Azerbaijani Women of Georgia, Tbilisi, December 2012.

²⁹ Virginité has to be proven to the groom's female relatives following consummation of the marriage.

³⁰ National Center for Disease Control and Public Health in Georgia *et al.*, *Reproductive Health Survey*, p. 52.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p.215.

³³ See for instance United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948. Available at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

³⁴ UNICEF Azerbaijan and the State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs in Azerbaijan, *Early Marriages: Violation of the Human Rights of Children*, 2010, p. 47. Available at http://www.unicef.org/azerbaijan/Brochure_Eng.pdf.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁶ See Nayereh Tohidi, 'Soviet in Public, Azeri in Private', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 19(1/2), 2006, p. 116.

³⁷ While there was a specific legal provision against bride kidnapping under Soviet law (Article 134), it is treated equally to other forms of abductions in the Georgian Criminal Code.

³⁸ CEDAW/C/GEO/CO/3 §32.

³⁹ CEDAW/C/GEO/4-5 §145.

⁴⁰ *National Research on Violence against Women in Georgia* (2010), p. 68-69.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴² ECMI Interview with Leila Mamedova, the Union of Azerbaijani Youth in Georgia, Tbilisi, December 2012.

⁴³ ECMI Interview with Samira Ismayilova, chairwoman of the Azerbaijani Students' Association of Georgia, Tbilisi, February 2013.

⁴⁴ It is important to note that the deeply entrenched tradition of the so-called 'virginity institution' and its highly discriminating impact on the life of young girls is not only a taboo among ethnic Azeris, but in the whole country. See Giorgi Lomsadze, 'The Virginity Institute. Sex and the Georgian Woman,' *Eurasia.net*, 12 May 2010. Available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61048>.

⁴⁵ ECMI Interview, Kvemo Bolnisi, February 2013.

⁴⁶ Elke Kamm, 'The Pride of Being Kidnapped: Women's Views on Bride Kidnapping in Tetriskaro, Georgia.' *Caucasus Analytical Digest*. No. 42, 2010, p. 10.

⁴⁷ This respect for women who proved to be strong and 'brave' might be related to the still widespread image of strong and fearless womanhood propagated by the Soviet system. Yet, Soviet modernization remained artificial: even in Soviet times the ideal characteristics of an Azeri woman were honor (*namoos*), feminine shame (*hava*),



chastity and modesty (*ismat*), virginity before marriage, beauty and tact, high education, self-sacrificing motherhood, docility and subservience towards her husband, home-making skills, endurance, ethnic loyalty and endogamy. See Tohidi, 'Soviet in Public, Azeri in Private', p. 114.

⁴⁸ H. Bradbury and N. Samshadze, *Beyond Statistics: The Informal Economy in Rural Georgia* (Mercy Corps and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2012), p. 4. Available at <http://allianceskk.ge/files/pdf/Beyond%20Statistics%20The%20Informal%20Economy%20in%20Rural%20Georgia%20August%202012.pdf>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² According to a survey conducted by CRRC, 83% of Georgians think that ideally the man should be the main breadwinner in the family, although the majority admits that in reality women are more often the main source of income than not. See Mariam Naskidashvili, 'How Does Gender Determine Roles and Behaviors of Women in and outside of Georgian Families?' (Caucasus Research Resources Center, 2011), p. 2. Available at <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.co.at/2011/07/how-gender-determines-roles-and.html>.

⁵³ Naskidashvili, 'How Does Gender Determine Roles and Behaviors of Women in and outside of Georgian Families?' p. 164.

⁵⁴ ECMI Interview with Leila Suleimanova, head of the Union of Azerbaijani Women of Georgia, Tbilisi, December 2012.

⁵⁵ Elisabeth Duban, *Gender Assessment USAID/Georgia* (USAID, 2010), p. 24. Available at http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/EFD28F4AE04074D94925775A00081927-Full_Report.pdf.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁷ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, *Study of Social and Economic Conditions and Attitudes of Kvemo Kartli Population* pp. 166-167.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 7 and 14.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁶⁰ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, *Study of Social and Economic Conditions and Attitudes of Kvemo Kartli Population*, pp. 72-73.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶² Marneuli hosts two universities: a branch of Tbilisi State University and the Heydar Aliyev Georgia-Azerbaijan Humanitarian University (since 2008). However, many young Azeri girls desire to study in the capital.

⁶³ ECMI Caucasus Interview with Samira Ismayilova, chairwoman of the Azerbaijani Students' Association of Georgia, Tbilisi, January 2013.

⁶⁴ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, *Study of Social and Economic Conditions and Attitudes of Kvemo Kartli Population*, p. 144.

⁶⁵ See ECMI Caucasus, *Minorities in 2012 Parliamentary Elections Observatory*, 2012. Available at , http://www.ecmicaucasus.org/upload/Post_election_observations.pdf.

⁶⁶ According to the Election Code adopted in 2011, political parties which have at least two women among every ten candidates of their party lists get an additional 10% of state funding. See Civil Georgia, *Election Code goes into effect*, 13 January 2012. Available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24350>.

⁶⁷ Currently, out of the 19 members of the Cabinet of the Republic of Georgia there are three women: Minister of Foreign Affairs Maia Panjikidze, Minister of Justice Tea Tsulukiani, and Minister of Environmental Protection Khatuna Gogaladze.

⁶⁸ See *Minorities in 2012 Parliamentary Elections Observatory* (2012).

⁶⁹ ECMI Interview with Leila Mamedova, the Union of Azerbaijani Youth in Georgia, December 2012.

⁷⁰ See The National Democratic Institute, *Georgian Political Parties Agree To "Win With Women"*, 1 July 2010. Available at http://www.ndi.org/Georgian_Political_Parties_Agree_to_Win_with_Women.

⁷¹ ECMI Interview with Samira Ismayilova, Azerbaijani Students' Association of Georgia, Tbilisi, January 2013.

⁷² Duban, *Gender Assessment USAID/Georgia*, p. 17.

⁷³ ECMI Interview with Azeri sakrebulo deputy, Marneuli, January 2013.

⁷⁴ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, *Study of Social and Economic Conditions and Attitudes of Kvemo Kartli Population*, p. 20.



⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷⁶ ECMI Interview with Leila Mamedova, the Union of Azerbaijani Youth of Georgia, Tbilisi, December 2012.

⁷⁷ ECMI Interview, Tbilisi, December 2012.

⁷⁸ Duban, *Gender Assessment USAID/Georgia*, p. 15.

⁷⁹ See Department of Information and Analysis of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Georgia, *Domestic violence, domestic conflicts and juveniles 2007-2011*, 2012. Available at http://www.police.ge/uploads/images/2012/Domestic_violence_domestic_conflicts_and_juveniles_ENG.pdf.

⁸⁰ “Although the law formally requires the state language to be used in public administration, and there were attempts to enforce this during President Saakashvili’s first term, a shortage of Georgian speakers and a flexible approach by the government mean that in reality most communication is in Armenian.” (See International Crisis Group, ‘Georgia: The Javakheti Region’s Integration Challenges’, *Europe Briefing*, 63, 2011, p. 7. Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2011/europe/Georgia-the-javakheti-region-integration-challenges.aspx>).

⁸¹ ECMI Interview with employee of the Akhaltsikhe crisis center led by the Tbilisi-based NGO ‘Anti-Violence Network of Georgia’, Akhaltsikhe, February 2013.

⁸² Nora Dudwick, ‘Out of the kitchen into the crossfire: women in independent Armenia’ in Mary Buckley, ed., *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 235.

⁸³ See *National Research on Violence against Women in Georgia* (2010), p. 54.

⁸⁴ See Nana Sumbadze and George Tarkhan-Mouravi, *Gender & Society in Samtskhe-Javakheti*, (Tbilisi: Institute for Policy Studies, 2004) p. 71. Available at http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00002459/01/Gender_in_Samtskhe_last.pdf.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸⁶ National Center for Disease Control and Public Health in Georgia *et al.*, *Reproductive Health Survey*, p. 217.

⁸⁷ See Sumbadze and Tarkhan-Mouravi, *Gender & Society in Samtskhe-Javakheti*, p. 70.

⁸⁸ ECMI Interview with Tsira Meskhishvili, chairwoman of the Samtskhe-Javakheti association ‘Toleranti’, Akhaltsikhe, February 2013.

⁸⁹ Dudwick, ‘Out of the kitchen into the crossfire: women in independent Armenia’, p. 235.

⁹⁰ ECMI Interview, Akhalkalaki, February 2013.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² ECMI Interview with women activists, Akhalkalaki, February 2013.

⁹³ Sumbadze and Tarkhan-Mouravi, *Gender & Society in Samtskhe-Javakheti*, p. 42.

⁹⁴ Azeri women tend to have children in their late teens and early twenties, whereas the birth rate among Armenians peaks in their mid-twenties (National Center for Disease Control and Public Health in Georgia *et al.*, *Reproductive Health Survey*, p. 52).

⁹⁵ ECMI Meeting with women activists, Akhalkalaki, February 2013.

⁹⁶ See Hedwig Lohm, *Javakheti after the Rose Revolution*, ECMI Working Paper No 38, 2007. Available at http://edoc.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/HALCoRe_derivate_00001850/English%20Version.pdf.

⁹⁷ See Sumbadze and Tarkhan-Mouravi, *Gender & Society in Samtskhe-Javakheti*.

⁹⁸ See *Gender Analysis of the SDC-funded and the Mercy Corps-implemented ‘Market Alliances against Poverty’ Programme Area* (Akhaltsikhe: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Mercy Corps, 2011). Available at

<http://www.alliances.ge/images/stories/alliances/booklets/Alliances%20SJ%20Gender%20Survey%202%20%20May%202011.pdf>.

⁹⁹ See *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ See *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ See *Migration and Return in Georgia: Trends, Assessment, and Potential* (Tbilisi: Caucasus Research Resources Centres, 2007), p. 9. Available at <http://crrccenters.org/store/files/Projects/DRC-CRRC%20Migration%20Trends%20Study%20final%2030JAN2008.pdf>.

¹⁰² See European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and Benedixen & Associates, *Georgia National Public Opinion Survey on Remittances*, 2007. Available at <http://www.ebrd.com/downloads/sector/etc/surge.pdf>.

¹⁰³ For instance Alastani, Varevani, Karstakhi and Ordja in Akhalkalaki. However, Demorchian emphasizes that there is a similar situation in almost all villages of Akhalkalaki district.



- ¹⁰⁴ ECMI Caucasus meeting in Akhalkalaki, February 2013.
- ¹⁰⁵ Both Finca Bank and Credo Bank, which provide microcredits, have branches in Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki.
- ¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Wheatley, *The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli provinces of Georgia*. ECMI Working Paper No 44, 2009, p.9. Available at: http://www.ecmicaucasus.org/upload/publications/working_paper_44_en.pdf.
- ¹⁰⁷ Civil Development Agency, *Study of Multi-Ethnic Society in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti*, p. 22-23.
- ¹⁰⁸ There is currently a branch of Tbilisi State University operating in Akhaltsikhe. The TSU branch in Akhalkalaki has lost its accreditation in 2007.
- ¹⁰⁹ Statistics published by the National Examinations Center.
- ¹¹⁰ ECMI meeting with women activists, Akhalkalaki, February 2013.
- ¹¹¹ See *Minorities in 2012 Parliamentary Elections Observatory* (2012).
- ¹¹² ECMI focus group meeting with women activists in Akhalkalaki, February 2013.
- ¹¹³ ECMI Interview with Sakrebulo members, Akhaltsikhe, February 2013.
- ¹¹⁴ ECMI Interview, Akhalkalaki, February 2013.
- ¹¹⁵ ECMI focus meeting with female NGO representatives, Akhalkalaki, February 2013.
- ¹¹⁶ Civil Development Agency, *Study of Multi-Ethnic Society in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti*, p. 16-17.
- ¹¹⁷ See list of civil society organisations in Georgia, available at <http://csogeorgia.org/organisationArchive/eng>.
- ¹¹⁸ 2002 Georgia Census. Available at <http://www.ecmicaucasus.org/upload/stats/Census%202002.pdf>.
- ¹¹⁹ ECMI Caucasus Interview, Tbilisi, November 2012.
- ¹²⁰ See Minority Rights Group International, *Breaking the cycle of exclusion: minority rights in Georgia today*, 22 December 2009. Available at <http://www.minorityrights.org/9547/briefing-papers/>.
- ¹²¹ ECMI Interview, Tbilisi, March 2013.
- ¹²² Statement of Kvinna till Kvinna representative at the meeting of UN Gender Theme Group with the Gender Equality Council of the Parliament, Tbilisi, 13 February 2013.
- ¹²³ See UNHCR, *Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Georgia: A gap analysis*, 2009. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/4ad827f59.pdf>.
- ¹²⁴ See Giorgi Sanikidze, 'Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Caucasus Region: Global and Local Islam in the Pankisi Gorge' in Tomohiko Uyama, ed., *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia*, Slavic Research Center, No. 14, 2007. Available at http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no14_ses/contents.html.
- ¹²⁵ Conor Prasad, 'Georgia's Muslim Community: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?', ECMI Working Paper No. 58, 2012, p. 12. Available at http://www.ecmicaucasus.org/upload/publications/working_paper_58_en.pdf.
- ¹²⁶ The information is based on a presentation and discussion with Kist and Chechen women in November 2012, organised by KRDF in Duisi.
- ¹²⁷ According to a recent ECMI research, mixed marriages with Georgians are no longer common among Kists.
- ¹²⁸ Prasad, 'Georgia's Muslim Community: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?', p. 13.
- ¹²⁹ Ibid.
- ¹³⁰ See for instance WRITENET, *The Human Rights Situation of the Yezidi Minority in the Transcaucasus (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan)*, May 2008. Available at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/485fa2342.html>.
- ¹³¹ David Szakonyi, 'No Way Out: An Assessment of the Romani Community in Georgia', ECMI Working Paper No. 39, 2008, p. 3. Available at http://www.ecmicaucasus.org/upload/publications/working_paper_39.pdf.
- ¹³² See Marriage and Family Encyclopedia, *Kurdish Families - Kurdish Marriage Patterns*. Available at <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1026/Kurdish-Families-Kurdish-Marriage-Patterns.html>.
- ¹³³ ECMI Interview with Lili Safarova, chairman of the Independent League of Yezidi-Kurdish Women, Tbilisi, December 2012. Few Yezidi women are even able to recognize acts of domestic violence as such..
- ¹³⁴ See Nodar Sarjeladze, Nino Shushania, Lia Melikishvili, and Marina Baliashvili, *Tolerance in Multiethnic Georgia* (Tbilisi: Mtsignobari, 2009)
- ¹³⁵ See the *Overview of the Mama Cash Project*, available at: <http://history.mamacash.nl/grantees/regions/europe/independent-league-of-yezidi-kurdish-women-georgia/>
- ¹³⁶ ECMI Caucasus interview with Lili Safarova, head of the Independent League of Yezidi-Kurdish Women of Georgia Tbilisi, December 2012.
- ¹³⁷ See *Overview of the Mama Cash Project*.
- ¹³⁸ ECMI interview with Elena Proshikian, Roma activist, Tbilisi, March 2013.



¹³⁹ See Szakonyi, 'No Way Out: An Assessment of the Romani Community in Georgia'.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁴¹ ECMI interview with Elena Proshikian, Tbilisi, March 2013.

¹⁴² See National Center for Disease Control and Public Health in Georgia *et al.*, *Reproductive Health Survey*.



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